

Chaityabhoomi : A self-conscious stream of class and political consciousness of a misfit amongst misfits

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From the train, all I did was started to follow a young boy with Jai Bhim tattooed on his arm, and I was soon in a sea of humanity, a blue of Ambedkar, the white of the saris of women, and the currents pushing towards the islands of activity in the middle of Shivaji Park.



I have to confess. This was my first visit to Chaityabhoomi, and I realize that when you're surrounded by over 10,000,00 people, it's hard to have a singular narrative that can do justice to what the event really is and who the people really are. I had gone without questions, and only came across them when I started to speak to people: 'are you involved in any movement?' 'how long have you

been coming to Chaityabhoomi?' 'how did you get politicized?' 'where have you come from?'

My first conversation started right across the Indu Mills; a group of young boys were taking pictures of themselves in front of Indu Mills and a coterie of policemen and women, and I volunteered my talents and my 12-24mm lens, and have now emailed them their group photo. Indu Mills has already become a sight of wonder, this is where the memorial to Dr. Ambedkar shall be, the so-called Statue of Equality, and throngs of people congregate, and cellphones dot the crowdline as people take photos of the mills, as policemen try to drive the crowds away.



The closer one walks towards Shivaji Park one realizes, that amongst the countless number of people, there were probably more Ambedkars than Ambedkarites – he was there as statues, he was on the walls, on posters, on keychains, on t-shirts, on book covers, on newspapers, on ribbons, on pamphlets, on music cd covers, on banners, next to Bal Thackeray, next to Manmohan Singh, next to Advani, next to Mayawati, next to Prithviraj Chauhan, he was there as a young man, he was there as a speaker at a rally, he was there with his wife, and he was even there as a corpse.



The crowds were massive, yet absolutely disciplined. There were police towers with policemen with binoculars on all sides, and a large contingent of police around Shiv Sena's makeshift memorial to Bal Thackeray,

which had been given 24 hours to be removed, which is also a site of curiosity and was useful for people to give directions. A man was trying to find a friend amongst tens of thousands of people, and says on the phone: '*Thackereyla Jaleyla thikde zaao*' (Come to where they burnt Thackeray).



A cellphone was an instrument of vicarity. One after another, people were taking photographs of where Shiv Sainiks wept, where Bal Thackeray was on a pyre just a few days ago, and of a poster of Dr.Ambedkar in death. And a cellphone for family portraits. A cellphone for group portraits. A cellphone for photographs of Indu Mills. A cellphone to take photographs of familiar musicians. A cellphone to take photographs of the many stages across the venue where different leaders from different political parties gave their speeches.



There were people who one could easily see had come from the villages – they always tend to walk in line, one behind another, quietly, carrying their bags. There were trucks after trucks that carried people to the venue and back, with young men screaming slogans onto the roads. There were families with their children sleeping on the sidewalks, or under tarpaulin roofs, while a whole row of stalls were blasting different songs where with every step you'd take you'd hear two sets of songs, one in your right ear, another in your left.



There was musician on the run, from Kabir Kala Manch, whose musicians are accused by the state of being Maoists. Sheetal Sathe's magnum opus of an [anti-caste song](#) is being played where the Jai Bhim Comrade stall stood, and across the venue the film and the songs are being sold.

"The nausea is served in the plate, the untouchable nausea
The disgust is growing in the belly, the untouchable disgust
its there even in buds of flowers, its there even in sweet songs
that man should drink man's blood,
which is the land where this happens?
which is the land of this hellish nausea?
So it goes, my dear friend, so it goes in the villages,
so it goes my friend from the harsh lands, so it goes in remote places,
listen to this my friend, listen to the story of humans
hear out the torment my friend, the torment of our lands
there is but one blood in humans
there is but one
the bones are made the same
the bones are but one
just like the water
just like the flowers
just like the wind
this body, natural, is the same"



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After a point, it didn't matter, I knew I was standing out. A man with a camera. A man with fair skin.

I was also conscious about the [secret RSS Circular 411](#), my identity of the day driven by a strange little document, quoted by Shyam Chand in his book *Saffron Fascism*, whose excerpts I shall quote in full:

- Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes are to be recruited to the party so as to increase the volunteers to fight against the Ambedkarites and Mussalmans.
- Hindutva should be preached with a vengeance among physicians and pharmacists so that, with their help, time expired [sic.] and spurious medicines might be distributed amongst the Scheduled Castes, Mussalmans and Scheduled Tribes. The newborn infants of Shudras, Ati-Shudras, Mussalmans, Christians and the like should be crippled by administering injections to them. To this end, there should be a show of blood-donation camps.
- Encouragement and instigation should be carried on [sic.] more vigorously so that the womenfolk of Scheduled Castes, Mussalmans and Christians live by prostitution.
- Plans should be made more fool-proof so that the people of the Scheduled Castes, Backward Classes, Musslamans and Christians, especially the Ambedkarites, become crippled by taking in [sic.] harmful eatables.
- Special attention should be given to the students of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes so as to make them read the history written according to our dictates.
- During riots the women of Mussalmans and Scheduled Castes should be gang-raped. Friends and acquaintances cannot be spared. The work should proceed on the Surat model.
- Publication of writings against Mussalmans, Christians, Buddhists and Ambedkarites should be accelerated. Essays and writings should be published in such a way as to prove that Ashoka was opposed to the Aryans.

- All literature opposed to Hindus and Brahmins are [sic.] to be destroyed. Dalits, Mussalmans, Christians and Ambedkarites should be searched out. Care should be taken to see that this literature do [sic.] not reach public places. Hindu literature is to apply [sic.] to the Backward Classes and Ambedkarites.
- The demand by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for filling in the backlog vacancies in services shall by no means be met. Watch should be kept to see that their demands for entry and promotion in government, non-government or semi-government institutions are to be rejected and their service records are destroyed with damaging reports.
- Measures should be taken to make the prejudices amongst Scheduled Castes and Backward people more deep-rooted. To this end, help must be taken from saints and ascetics.
- Attacks should be started with vigour against equality, preaching communists [sic.], Ambedkarites, Islamic teachers, Christian missionaries and neighbours [?].
- Assaults should be made on Ambedkar's statues with greater efforts.
- Dalit and Muslim writers are to be recruited to the party and by them the essays and literature opposed to the Dalits, Ambedkarites and Mussalmans written and preached. Attention is to be paid to see that these writings are properly edited and preached [sic.].
- Those opposed to Hindutva are to be murdered through false encounters. For this work the help of the police and semi-military [sic.] forces should always be taken.

And there I was, a Muslim by birth, by name, an agnostic by fence-sitting and star-gazing, a hater of mullahs, whose beards should be braided by the sacred threads of elitist brahmins and they should all be launched into the moon.

It was the 6th of December, it was a day when the Babri Masjid was demolished 20 years ago. And when the folks at Chaityabhoomi asked me about my 'jaati', when they realized I was a muslim, they were a little shocked and quiet, until I used my stock joke of the day that often led to peals of laughter: 'it's okay, we have enough mosques.'



But the demolition of Babri Masjid is not about mosques, it's about the growth of fascism. A fascism that has existed not just amongst the the Hindu Right, and the legacy of the Savarkars, but even amongst certain quarters of those who call themselves muslims, it has existed as the unfortunate cultural exigency of this society is perpetually nationalistic, repressed in every way a human being can be, and always looking for a scapegoat, the other to despise, to destroy, to annihilate.

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Yet at Chaityabhoomi, it wasn't hard to talk to people.



Two young men from Jhansi started a conversation with me. One was Dr.Sanjiv Dhole and Ashwin Bhure. Ashwin helped Dr.Sanji in their clinic. They're BSP loyalists. And I asked him about his education, he wasn't discriminated in college, and the 'Rajputs' in his village behaved themselves. He said it was Mayawati. Not Kanshi Ram. But Mayawati. She taught the Rajputs a lesson. I asked if he was involved in any other movement for people's rights. He said no. The doctor also said, that he wonders whether he will get anything from Chaityabhoomi this time.

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'Last year our performance was a bigger event,' Sachin, a singer from Republican Panthers, a six year old street performing group

says, 'There were two groups, there was us, and Kabir Kala Manch, and you know what happened to them.'

'What do you do?'

'I am a student.'

'Where?'

'I'm studying BMS (Bachelor of Management Studies).' He said, '*Karna padta hai.*'

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One of the most important conversations I had was with a group of young boys from Amarnath, Thane; the oldest in his third year in BA, and three others still studying, who I met after a performance by a Republican Panthers' theater group, who sold CDs of Kabir Kala Manch, whose stories of standing up to 'the state' were on the minds of all those who sang and performed.

'When did you first start to perform political songs?' I asked the oldest.

'Two years ago.'

'How?'





'We had an interest in social issues. We felt that something must happen. And I had a friend who was performing like this, so we came with him.'

'So let me ask you, when was the first time you felt something was wrong about the way things are? When did you start getting politicized?'



'Khairlanji.' Said the oldest, 'See I am a Buddhist, and when I was young, we always saw posters of Ambedkar everywhere, we all thought, 'yeah this is someone important,' and we'd read a little even though we never completely understood, there was some interest, and little by little, we started to understand, and then we grew up and knew the way to go.'

'And I like singing, I like performing.'

Another singer from Krantikari Salaam, a man now in his fifties also traces his political development to a friend who was already involved with the Dalit Panthers in the 70's, who took him off from his job and made him a street performer. '*Tu kidhar ja raha hai, kaha ghum raha hai, chalo*' He said, 'so that's how I joined.'



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A crowd stood around a young boy, a few men were lecturing him, and one man took out his scissors and cut off the sacred threads, the *janua* from his wrist. 'Don't wear that here, at least not today.'

'Ambedkar fought against these superstitions and you can't just come here with that around your hand.'

They are from the *Dhamma Upasak Upasika*, a 15 year old group, self-funded without any political parties to back them. On the asphalt around them one can see quite a few *januas*. Our conversations moved onto Gandhi, 'Harijan as a word shouldn't even exist, Agar aap Hari ke jan ho, *toh unko adhikar kyu nahi dete ho?*'



They spoke about the media, and how they will only view this event as where the people have made a mess, and how every channel on television has religious tv shows, and every serial is conservative, and there is almost nothing on television that has any scientific reasoning; 'stuck 5000 years ago' as one individual says. They spoke about how the state 'spends 400 crores on Kumbh Mela', and a mere percent of that amount is spent in Chaityabhoomi. They spoke about how the state has given a holiday for Ganpati, '*Ganpati ne savidhan likha hai, bharat ka?*' (Did Ganpati write the constitution?) They spoke about how the general public views Chaityabhoomi as '*aap ke log sab ganda karke nikal jayenge*', and unsurprisingly, it was

very hard to locate a dustbin in Chaityabhoomi. I only found five near a long line where people were eating, and it was full by evening.



And we eventually touched about liberalization and dalit capitalism. 'There should've been economic reforms from the ground up, but everything that happened only benefitted the 'poonjipatis' .

'It did not improve our condition,' Said Chandrashekar, an activist, 'the only way it can improve is that we all need to be Ambedkarites.'

'What about Dalit Capitalism?

'Joh dalit enterpriser hai, joh bhi hai, awashakta nahi hai, humhe awashakta hai, isliye hum usko leke jathe hai, but he's using only the name of Babasaheb, he's not following his ideology, if he really wanted to follow, he should help us.'



I spoke about the most ironic of Dalit Capitalists, Ramakant Jadhav of Shivalik Ventures, the builders of Golibar, who've used every dirty trick in the book, to get the project rolling, and to break down the homes of even people in Ambevadi, who are mostly Buddhist Dalits, and those who protest against his project always had their meeting to fuck with the builder right in the Budh Vihar. The crowd around Dhamma Upasak Upasika, strongly condemned him, and strangely enough, one individual just dismissed him as a 'chamar' and not an Ambedkarite.



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I eventually bumped into Milind, one of the singularly most impressive people I've ever known in the Dalit movement, a man who I had first gone to, when I wanted to go and document what happened in Ramabai.



He himself, in 1997, an employee of the airlines, had gone on the day of the police firing, and started the long walk towards justice. He had drawn me a map of what had happened that day, a map I keep in my possession, of where the protests were, and where each of the 11 people were shot. A map, another artifact, in the long history of atrocities committed in this country. A map, another indictment of the murderous tendencies of the police. A policeman who got off his jeep, and just ordered the firing into the slum, at people who were not protesting, at a young boy, at old men, at men who worked, whose injuries would deprive them of a livelihood. A policeman, indicted by the Dalits, as driven to his actions, by nothing else, but the Book of Manu, a policeman who the state tried its best to protect, and eventually only sent to jail for around a week.





Milind and I, old acquaintances, watched a helicopter circle the crowds and start throwing marigold flowers onto the people below.

Some were excited by it. Looking into the sky, at this machine that dropped saffron marigolds into the crowd.

'When have they ever seen a helicopter?'. He said, 'they are excited.'

And they were.

The farce missed most of the people, when the same helicopter that threw marigold flowers onto the crowd, also threw a gigantic plastic bag into the crowd.

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I met Anil Wani, from Bhiwandi, an activist with the Bahujan Vidyarthi Sanghatna, who saw me taking photographs and struck up a conversation with me. He was with a group of teachers, one who taught in a Municipal school, and another who took up private tuitions. Anil, was a man who spoke with a sense of satisfaction, but also a strange kind of complacency, as he mentioned how now he has to find something to do, now that Indu Mills will soon be a memorial for Dr. Ambedkar, a battle that he fought for 20 years. I asked him about whether his involvement with a long battle for a statue, was equated with the battle for everyday rights for people, when everyday can be a Khairlanji.



'What do you think about what happened in Tamil Nadu?' I asked him and his group.

'What had happened?'

'Hundreds of homes of SCs were burnt down, women were molested.'

'Well, if anything happens in Maharashtra, we're ready.'

'So what happens in Tamil Nadu is too far away from Maharashtra?'

'The government should take action.' He said, confidently. *'Yaha bhi andolan karenge. Hamare SC ke haath mein satta aane doh, hum sab ko barabar kar lenge.'* (We will fight here as well. Let our dalit people get political power and we will teach them all a lesson.)

'What do you feel about what they put in the syllabus?' I asked the teachers.

'What was wrong with the syllabus?' Asked the BMC school teacher.



'Like, who do they teach is the father of the nation?'

'Oh yes, that is totally wrong.'

'Like, they only teach us that Ambedkar just wrote the constitution and Jyotirao Phule just started a school for girls? Like they never tell us how much they fought against caste. '

'yeh desh ka samajwasta aisi hi hai, yeh desh ka samaj khula ambedkar joh sika denge, toh woh hamare saath hi aa jayenge.' (The country is the way it is, if people taught Ambedkar freely then they would all come with us).



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There were two media vans. I saw Doordarshan, and a friend apparently saw Zee. I met three photographers, one from the Times of India, and the other two from Mahanagar and another newspaper, whose name I can't recall. I finally met four more journalists, and to my surprise all four of them are the same journalists who document and cover what is happening in the slums of Mumbai, and are aware of the juggernaut of the builder lobby that's bulldozing people out of the city.

We met outside a building overlooking Shivaji Park.

We all tried to get the watchmen to let us go to the top and get a photograph so we can see the actual magnitude of the crowd.

None of them let us through. They kept saying the secretaries of the buildings are out of town. And it is known that people around this area take off during Chaityabhoomi.

A few days earlier, each and every one of these rooftops were open to photographers to take pictures of Bal Thackeray's funeral.



Yet some genius from Sakal did manage to get an overhead shot.

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I met a young boy and a young girl cleaning the venue. Both were wage labourers and came from Sion-Dharavi.

The BMC hired them just for the 6th of December, and they have been doing this work for the past four years.

I asked how much they get paid, the boy said Rs.100, and just a little while later, a friendly contractor walked up to us, and said that it's actually Rs.230. Rs. 100 for the day, and Rs. 130 for the evening.

I finally asked them their caste.



They said Marathi.

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On my way back home, I thought I would walk a little to process the thousand conversations, and eventually I realized I wasn't going to get a Taxi home, and I had merely 10 rupees in my pocket. I live in Bandra, so from Dadar, I took a long walk in shoes that have outlived their time, and eventually stopped and sat down at Mahim on a makeshift promenade where a few men were also taking a break, smoking beedis, enjoying the slow soft breeze from the ocean. Then suddenly, there was a commotion.



A drunk had tried to get fresh with a Muslim woman in her thirties. And she and her companion, another woman, they didn't take it lightly.

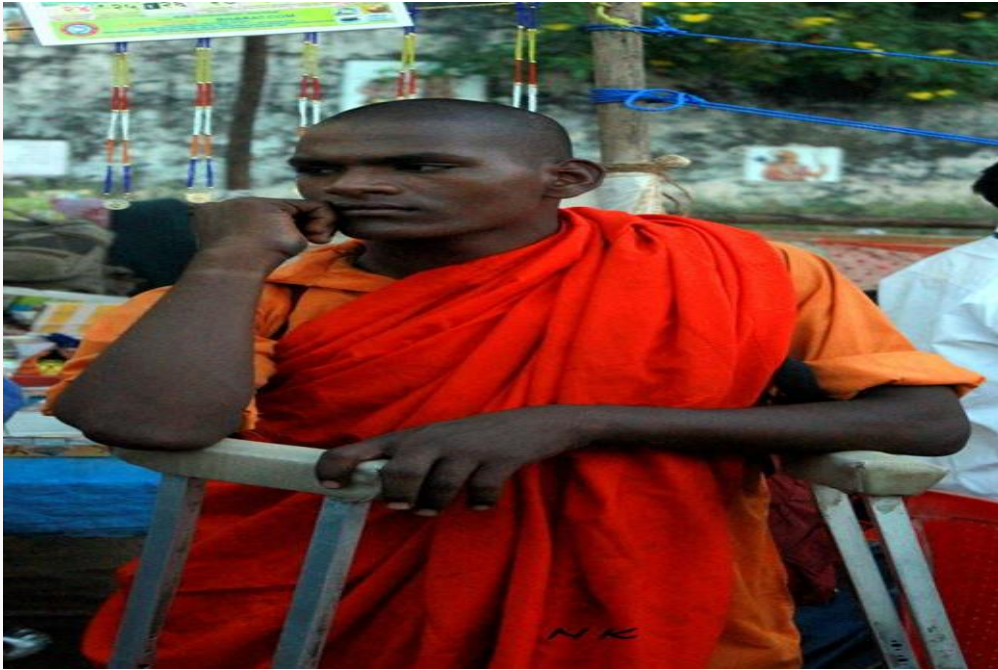
They started to slap him around, hit him, punch him, scream at him. A man who was with the women had come between the two women to hit him as well, but the women sent him away, they could do it better. And they did. The man was drunk, and the two muslim women let him have it.

We, sitting on the balustrade, a wall of rubble, were smiling amongst ourselves. The man next to me, says there's always a little entertainment here, and we all stood with the women, mocking the drunk.

As the women got into a taxi to go home, I gave a little thumbs up to the lady, she smiled back and acknowledged it. The quiet intimacy of strangers.

All the workers, the migrants, laughed amongst themselves.

And another truck from Chaityabhoomi drove past us, with young boys waving flags and screaming slogans.



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**Javed Iqbal** is a photographer and a writer. You'll find more of his work at [moonchasing.wordpress.com](http://moonchasing.wordpress.com).